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ABSTRACT

The interpersonal linkages between adult children, their parents, and society are complex. In order to measure the levels of stress and satisfaction present in the relationship of young-adult daughters and their mothers, the Parent-Adult Child Relationships Inventory was administered to 163 mother-daughter pairs. The daughters were 18 to 25 years old and students at the University of Minnesota, Duluth. Moderator variables examined included age, age difference, birth order, education, residence, financial support, marital status, and stepparents. The results indicated that factors contributing to variance in stress were the child's lifestyle values and the parents' lifestyle and expectations. Enjoyment from activities done together and pleasure in the child's accomplishments were factors contributing to variance in satisfaction. Daughters reported significantly different levels of stress and satisfaction from what their mothers reported. The evidence indicates that normative family stress occurs at several internal levels during the daughters' young adult years. Stress appeared to be associated with the boundaries and linkages of the family value system. Satisfaction was associated with elements of family solidarity and family strengths. Potential sources of stress and satisfaction for both generations can be addressed in appropriate societal systems. (Author/LLL)

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STRESSFUL AND SATISFYING LINKS BETWEEN YOUNG-ADULT DAUGHTERS, THEIR PARENTS AND SOCIETY

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STRESSFUL AND SATISFYING LINKS BETWEEN YOUNG-ADULT DAUGHTERS, THEIR PARENTS AND SOCIETY

Abstract

The paper reports on a study which measured the levels of stress and satisfaction present in the relationship of young-adult daughters and their parents. A new instrument developed specifically for this population, the Parent-Adult Child Relationships Inventory, was administered to 163 mother-daughter pairs. Moderator variables examined included age, age difference, birth order, education, residence, financial support, marital status and stepparents. Hypotheses were tested using matched pair t-test, Pearson r and ANOVA with a significance level of .05. Findings indicated that factors contributing to variance in stress were the child's lifestyle values and the parents' lifestyle and expectations. Enjoyment from activities done together and pleasure in the child's accomplishments were factors contributing to variance in satisfaction. Daughters reported significantly different levels of stress and satisfaction than their mothers reported. Significant differences in daughters' reports were shown by certain demographic variables. Evidence indicates normative family stress occurs at several internal levels during the daughters' young-adult

years. Stress appears to be associated with the boundaries and linkages of the family value system. Satisfaction was associated with elements of family solidarity and family strengths. Potential sources of stress and satisfaction for both generations can be addressed in appropriate societal systems.

STRESSFUL AND SATISFYING LINKS BETWEEN YOUNG-ADULT DAUGHTERS, THEIR PARENTS AND SOCIETY

The interpersonal linkages between adult-aged children, their parents, and society are complex. This paper will examine the links that young-adult daughters and their mothers perceive as stressful and satisfying in their relationship. The impact of society can be noted in the factors associated with stress and satisfaction in this particular parent-child relationship.

Adult-aged children frequently express a variety of feelings toward their parents. Often these feelings include satisfaction and appreciation for parents, but sometimes negative feelings are expressed indicating the children are not pleased with their association with parents. Parents of adult-aged children have also expressed mixed feelings toward the relationship. Concern for the family relationships between these two generations led to the study.

In the research literature, most of the parent-child studies involve young or adolescent children or elderly parents. When studies did involve young-adult children, they often relied on reports of the children or the parents but rarely gave both views of the relationship (Rossi, 1980; Troll & Bengtson, 1979).

The purpose of this study was to measure the stress and satisfaction associated with the parent-child relationship as

experienced by both young-adult daughters and their mothers. The goals were (1) to identify specific factors that contributed to the variance in stress and satisfaction experienced by daughters, (2) to determine congruence of daughters' and mothers' reports of the relationship, and (3) to identify demographic variables related to stress and satisfaction.

The study investigated several research hypotheses:

1. Daughters will report a higher level of stress in the parent-child relationship than their mothers will report.

2. Daughters will report a lower level of satisfaction in the parent-child relationship than their mothers will report.

3. Persons reporting high satisfaction levels will also report low stress levels.

4. Demographic variables will reflect a difference in the levels of stress and satisfaction reported by daughters.

The interactional framework for family analysis was used as the conceptual model. A correlational design was used to compare mother-daughter reports on the variables of stress and satisfaction.

The concept of stress has received much attention in research but often lacks explicit definition (McCubbin & Patterson, 1981). Severe family stress has been studied for decades (Hill, 1949; McCubbin, Joy, Cauble, Comeau,

Patterson, & Needle, 1980). Less is known about normative stress occurring in the routine functioning of a family system. In this study, stress was defined as the feelings of conflict, tension or discomfort occurring between adult children and their parents in their routine functioning as a family system. This definition incorporates the three general levels of normative stress as conceptualized by Bell and others (1980): The intrapsychic level of individual internal conflict, the interpersonal level of pressure from a difference in beliefs, values or expectations, and the systemic level of composite family stress from tension or conflict between any two family members. Other research on stress has linked it with transitional stages of the family life cycle involving boundary changes in the family system (Boss, 1980).

While stress deserves attention, there is also a need to give attention to elements which contribute to pleasureable aspects of family life. In this study, satisfaction was defined as feelings of pleasure or enjoyment occurring between adult children and their parents in the family system. This definition incorporates the concepts of family solidarity, including activities, affect and consensus (Bengtson and Cutler, 1976), as well as the components of family strengths indicated in research by Stinnett (1979).

The population in this study was limited to mothers and

daughters because of the close ties of this dyad and the potential impact of social movements and trends on their relationship. The sample contained 163 mother-daughter pairs. The daughters were 18 to 25 years old and students at the University of Minnesota, Duluth.

Data collection was accomplished with a self-report rating scale developed specifically for this population by the writer. The scale, The Parent-Adult Child Relationships Inventory, has individual forms for mothers and daughters with similar items. The instrument contained items describing a situation involving feelings of stress or satisfaction. Participants were to check how frequently each situation occurred using a 5-point scale. Items for the instrument were derived from pilot study data which were subjected to factor analytic techniques to obtain a set of factor scales. The factor scales, accounting for the greatest variance among subjects, were confirmed by the study sample.

The instrument consisted of four scales, two associated with stress and two with satisfaction. The first factor scale accounting for the most variance in stress was labeled "Child's Lifestyle Values." This scale included items indicating disagreement over the child's birth control and abortion attitudes, living arrangements, religion, drug or alcohol use and sexual values. The second factor scale

focused on the stress caused by the "Parents' Lifestyle and Expectations." The parents' lifestyle, alcohol use, marriage, and expectations for their child's sleep and housework contributed to the second greatest variance in stress.

While the stress scales both dealt with lifestyle items, the two scales accounting for the greatest variance in satisfaction each represented a different theme. The first satisfaction scale was labeled "Togetherness" for it included items indicating parents and children enjoying each other as friends, talking as adults, feeling love and taking part in activities together. The second satisfaction scale was labeled "Child's Accomplishments." Items indicated the child perceived the parents' pleasure with the child's problem-solving ability, educational achievements, and decisions.

The Parent-Adult Child Relationships Inventory consisted of these four scales with a total of 32 items arranged randomly without scale labels. Demographic items were also included. Reliability and validity checks were conducted with the pilot and study samples.

The data collected from the 163 mother-daughter pairs were analyzed in terms of the hypotheses using matched pair *t*-tests, Pearson's *r*, and ANOVA with a .05 significance level. The first hypothesis predicted that

daughters would report a higher level of stress than their mothers would report. In examining the findings, daughters did report a significantly higher level of stress on the Child's Lifestyle Values Scale ($p < .001$). However, on the Parents' Lifestyle and Expectations Scale the difference in the means was not significant. These findings suggest that when the daughters' lifestyle values contrast with parental values, the stress experienced by the daughter may be more frequent than mothers perceive it to be.

The second hypothesis predicted that daughters would report a lower level of satisfaction than mothers would report. In comparing the means, daughters reported significantly lower levels on both satisfaction scales ($p < .05$). These findings are consistent with other research indicating that the older of two adjacent generations tends to report more positive feelings toward the other (Bengtson & Cutler, 1976; Johnson & Bursk, 1977).

The third hypothesis predicting that persons reporting a high satisfaction level will also report a low stress level was confirmed by both mothers and daughters ($p < .001$). The findings suggest that when parent-child relationships are enjoyable, there is a relatively low amount of tension or conflict in the family.

The fourth hypothesis predicted that demographic variables would reflect a difference in levels of stress and

satisfaction reported by daughters. Several variables tested showed significant differences, while a few did not. On the scale measuring stress associated with the Child's Lifestyle Values, the daughter's age indicated differences ($p < .01$). As the daughter's age increased, so did the frequency of stress. This finding is somewhat disturbing, as when adolescents end their teenage years and enter their twenties, parents often expect the turbulence to decrease. It is possible that these university-student daughters were exposed to more diverse influences on their lifestyle or are more assertive regarding their lifestyle values. They may feel that it is their right to move outside the boundary of the family value system, either in attitudes, behavior, or both.

The stress scale which focused on Parents' Lifestyle and Expectations revealed differences involving the mother's marital status ($p < .05$) and presence of a stepfather ($p < .05$). More frequent stress was reported when mothers were separated or remarried. Caution is needed in generalizing due to the small number of cases in these categories, even though the statistical tests do adjust for cell size. However, research by Gottlieb & Chafetz (1979) indicates that the parents' marital relationship does affect conflict in the parent-adult child relationship.

Several demographic variables indicated differences on the Togetherness satisfaction scale. The mother's marital

status appears to influence this factor, too, with significantly lower scores for separated or widowed mothers ($p < .0001$). The birth order of daughters indicated significantly different levels with lowest satisfaction scores for middle-born children, increasing scores for youngest, oldest, and only children in that order ($p < .05$). Middle children may face more competition for parents' time, or they may prefer the company of friends or siblings; further research is needed for a valid explanation.

The variable of financial dependency on parents provided surprising results with significant differences on the Togetherness satisfaction scale ($p < .05$). Daughters were grouped and compared according to the portion of financial support provided to them by parents. The lowest frequency of satisfaction occurred among daughters who received no financial help from parents; the highest mean occurred when parents provided more than half of the money needed for their support. This is surprising because other studies show low satisfaction and high conflict when there is high financial dependence on parents. One could speculate that daughters who are financially dependent while being university students may spend time with parents to show their appreciation.

Satisfaction in Togetherness also differed significantly with the mother's educational level ($p < .01$); greater satisfaction was indicated as the mothers' educational level

increased. Highest satisfaction was reported when the mothers had a college degree.

No significant differences in satisfaction associated with the Child's Accomplishments Scale were indicated by the demographic variables examined. Several other demographic variables were examined but did not produce significant differences on any of the four scales.

The findings of this study indicate that relationships between parents and young-adult daughters are indeed complex. Evidence indicates that normative family stress occurs at several internal levels during daughters' young-adult years. Stress appears to be associated with conflict in the boundaries and linkages of the family value system. Satisfaction was associated with elements of family strengths and solidarity. Potential sources of stress and satisfaction for both generations can be addressed in appropriate societal systems, such as in educational, counseling, and religious settings.

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